

“Time to Take the Plunge”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
I Lent – 1 March 2009  
Genesis 9:8-17; I Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 9-15

As a small child, water terrified me. I was several years old before I could tolerate a shower. Outings on our tiny v-hulled boat at a nearby man-made lake were dreadful to me. My parents, well-meaning and exercising their parental responsibility, felt that exposure to what frightened me would eventually cause me to fear it less. This thought, along with the desire to insure my safety on our trips to the lake, inspired my mom and dad to sign me up for swimming lessons each summer for several consecutive years.

The teacher, much to her credit, was a paragon of patient kindness, but nothing could spare me the embarrassment as my peers – and even children much younger than me – excelled at the various strokes, able to keep their eyes open underwater without the aid of goggles. I couldn't even float on my back. I was simply too tense; plus I had much less positive buoyancy twenty-five years ago.

Of course, none of that was anything compared to the high dive. To everyone else, it seemed such a delight to clamber up that rickety ladder, strut out onto this suspiciously bouncy plank, and jump right out into plain nothingness, only to splash an instant later into a bottomless pit of water, from which somehow they emerged time and again unscathed. OK, the deep end was twelve feet, and the high dive was ten feet up, but to a short hydrophobic kid, it was sheer insanity.

Jumping off the high dive into the abyss wasn't a requirement for completing the swim course, but the pressure was intense, like some sort of cult initiation, only worse, because once

you finally got up the gumption to do it, then people assumed you loved it just as much as they did, so they encouraged you to climb right back up and take another roll of the dice with your life.

For the record I have forgiven my parents, and I have composed an alternated sermon for posting to the website that has no mention of the enduring trauma caused by my childhood swimming lessons. However, I have recovered, because they were right. Though swimming and boating are still not among my favorite pastimes, repeated exposure helped me learn that water, in whatever quantity, was not some malevolent force intent upon my destruction.

I probably took Noah and his family a really long time to learn that lesson. Sure, they were saved from the flood by their righteousness in the sight of God, but imagine what it must have been like, floating at sea for 150 days after forty straight days and nights of torrential rain: the stench and cacophony of all those animals with no land in sight but probably plenty of debris, much of it rather gruesome. Imagine New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, magnified a million-fold. Noah and his immediate family were the sole survivors of this worldwide catastrophe. They had to be grateful, but what experience could possibly impress upon a person with greater force the might, the majesty, the sheer killing power of water?

We know its dangers well, situated as we are on a peninsula bounded by two giant rivers and a treacherous ocean, but the waters in the James and in the York and in the Atlantic aren't really what we're afraid of. There's a different body of water, miniscule by comparison, that flows from a tap to a font, and then trickles in tiny dribbles three times down our forehead. It usually catches us unaware. In fact, many of us were sleeping when the water from the font came to take us, though even for those fortunate enough to remember their baptism, life has

remained a continual process of reconciling ourselves to both the wonder and the terror of what those droplets of water signify.

The waters of baptism scare us, because we know that once we penetrate the surface, we don't know how deep the waters go, or where they may carry us, or what may lurk within their depths. We often regard baptism as a mere event, a moment in time, but it is an extensive continuum that embraces our entire lives. For this reason, we have the apprehension that once we submerge there may be no emergence, captured as we are by that primal force, symbolized by water, yet so much more powerful in its ability to sweep us away, like a vicious undertow, to uncharted realms. There is, to be frank, a sinister element in our baptisms, blessed though they may be, because they bring us into the presence of a holy mystery that by nature both compels and repels us.

Peter alludes to this in his first letter, where he explicitly links the great flood with baptism, a power that obliterates the old so that the new, the fresh, the clean, the pure can arise and flourish. If that reality about the baptism in which we share doesn't frighten you, then you are either a holy saint worthy of our reverence or a foolish person who isn't paying sufficiently close attention.

In a way, our observance of Lent offers us an opportunity to scrutinize with greater care not the petty peccadilloes, the minor obsessions and modest shortcomings that stain our days. Rather Lent invites us to consider again just precisely what we've gotten ourselves into with these baptismal waters of covenant with God, raging waters that grant us a better life, the promise of an life everlasting, but by eroding the very foundation of who we think we are,

changing us by washing away what perhaps we treasure most about who we think we are or how we wish to appear to others or who we want to become.

You see, Lent is not chiefly about fish on Friday's or fasting from chocolate or being more attentive to turning the pages in your Forward Movement Day by Day, though each of those disciplines may prove spiritually fruitful. Lent is the spiritual equivalent of a little boy, scared to death of water, who has to go to the county pool every day for two weeks summer after summer, put on his swim trunks, and get in.

That may not be the Lent we want, but that's the Lent we've got, unless we choose to push it away and pretend that the waters of baptism are irrelevant, powerless, a paltry symbol of a fading faith. But that isn't what this crowd is all about. I know it, because I know you, some better than others, but a sufficient number well enough to sense the strength and courage that makes this parish a healthy place to grow in the spirit.

We want Lent at Hickory Neck, not because we prefer purple garments, prominent piety, or the pathos of suffering and death. At Hickory Neck, we want Lent, because we need it, and because we know we need it. We need it to bring us back to the waters that saved us by killing the sinful part of ourselves. We need Lent to thrust us into that spiritual wilderness for a period of time, which is what happened to Jesus after his baptism by John in the Jordan. We need Lent to exile us to the wilderness where we might find our own true selves, because the wilderness, time and again, proves to be where people are most likely to find God, who brings out the best in us. We need Lent, because without it, we just might succumb to the temptation of sitting off on the side or simply floating on the surface, buoyed up by the heart-chocking fat of complacency and self-righteous.

We need Lent, so let's go get it. Or rather, let's allow Lent to get us and take us under, deep into the water of our baptism. Who knows what adventures we might have? What can say what wonders dwell beneath the surface in the depths of that holy mystery? We've got thirty-six days left; thirty-six days, and counting. It's time to take the plunge. Amen.